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REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Promises to keep

SUMMARY

The present paper summarizes the historic events for children that occurred in 1990, including the achievement of universal child immunization (UCI), the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the World Summit for Children, which resulted in an ambitious World Declaration and a Plan of Action for Implementing the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children in the 1990s. Those events, together with the goals and strategies for children in the 1990s adopted by the Executive Board in 1990, represent a series of promises made to children around the world, millions of whom are affected by economic decline, natural disasters, civil strife and disease.

Chapter I discusses those promises in detail and the realities faced by children today. Chapter II, on the follow-up to the World Summit for Children, states that the principle of a "first call for children" must be adhered to, but as part of a broader development strategy that would combine the revitalization of economic growth, poverty reduction, human resources development and environmental protection. Specific measures proposed include sustaining and building on the success of UCI, giving priority to Africa, restructuring national budgets and development assistance and addressing the issue of the external debt burden of many developing countries. Chapter III proposes the creation of a global movement for children in which UNICEF would be one of many collaborators in a vast global alliance for children.

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I. PROMISES AND REALITIES

1. The year 1990 will surely be seen as a historic turning point for the world's children. It was a year when the needs and aspirations of children received more attention in more forums at higher policy-making levels than ever before. It was a year of great promises for children, as embodied in the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children and the Plan of Action for Implementing the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children in the 1990s, adopted by the World Summit for Children (A/45/625, annex) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Beyond promises, it was also a year of concrete, practical results, as evidenced by the effective achievement of the ambitious goal of universal child immunization (UCI), saving the lives of some 3 million children a year and protecting the health of millions more.

2. Historically, perhaps the most enduring promise for children made in 1990 was the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Opened for signature in January 1990, it obtained the requisite 20 ratifications to enter into force in less than eight months - the most rapid ratification of any international human rights convention in history. The Convention sets universal legal standards for the protection of children against neglect, abuse and exploitation, as well as guaranteeing their basic human rights, including survival, development, protection and participation in social, cultural, educational and other endeavours necessary for their well-being. Within a year of its adoption, the Convention was ratified or acceded to by a record 58 countries and signed by another 75 countries. While full implementation will take a long time, particularly in developing countries, its norms and standards will henceforth be among the guiding principles of development efforts.

3. The first major international action for translating the Convention into practice was the World Conference on Education For All, held at Jomtien, Thailand, in March 1990. Attended by representatives of virtually all the Governments of the world, as well as a large number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international agencies, the Conference adopted a declaration and a framework for action containing specific recommendations for rapid expansion of early child development, basic education and literacy, vocational training and acquisition of knowledge, skills and values through formal and non-formal educational channels to improve the quality of life of children and families. The guidance and commitment provided by this Conference are major promises for children because, as the World Summit for Children later affirmed, "besides its intrinsic value for human development and improving the quality of life, progress in education and literacy can contribute significantly to improvement in maternal and child health, in protection of the environment and in sustainable development". 1/

4. The approval by the UNICEF Executive Board in April 1990 of the goals and strategies for children in the 1990s (E/ICEF/1990/L.5) was a landmark action and represented a great promise to children. The goals and strategies not only chart the course for UNICEF action for the next decade and beyond, but

later served as the basis for the Declaration and Plan of Action of the World Summit for Children.

5. The Summit brought the needs and problems of children to the highest possible forum. Leaders from 159 countries representing 99 per cent of the world's population - including 71 heads of State or Government and 88 senior ministers and ambassadors - met at the United Nations on 30 September 1990 and adopted a Declaration and Plan of Action. These historic proclamations contain not only lofty principles, but also include very specific goals, many with measurable targets and deadlines for their achievement. To underscore the seriousness of their commitment, the leaders agreed to a detailed list of follow-up measures to be implemented at national and international levels.

6. Fulfilment of the commitments made at the Summit would save the lives of some 50 million children and 1.5 million women over the next decade and protect the health and well-being of millions more. Halving malnutrition and illiteracy would contribute to building societies with a healthy, productive and well-informed citizenry. Achievement of the goals endorsed by the Summit, would, in the words of the Plan of Action, "also contribute to lowering population growth, as sustained decline in child death rates towards the level at which parents become confident that their first children will survive is, with some time lag, followed by even greater reduction in child births". 2/

7. The Convention, the education conference, the Summit and the achievement of UCI made 1990 an historic year of unprecedented promise for children.

8. However, these great promises need to be seen in the context of the enormous problems facing children in the world. The year 1990 was by no means a year of unqualified success for children. In certain areas, the situation of children has actually deteriorated. Sub-Saharan Africa continued to reel under continuing economic decline, natural disasters, civil strife and the ravage of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) in many countries. A broad and durable solution has not yet been found to the external debt crisis in Latin America, or in Africa, which continues to undermine economic recovery and social progress. While the more dynamic East Asian countries continued their sustained economic growth and social progress, South Asia continued to be the region with the highest concentration of poverty and accompanying social ills. The situation between Iraq and Kuwait has not only shifted attention away from progress for children, which had seen considerable success in that region in recent years, but has also had a devastating impact beyond that region, particularly in many oil-importing developing countries. In Central and Eastern Europe, it is feared that without social safety nets, the situation of children may further deteriorate in the transition to market economies.

9. Statistics graphically illustrate the plight of children. Some 14 million children died in 1990, although some 3.5 million were saved because of progress in immunization, oral rehydration therapy and other child health services. Some 500,000 women died of causes related to pregnancy and child birth, most of them avoidable through pre-natal care, better child spacing and

family planning. Malnutrition sapped the normal growth of 100 million children. At the end of the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (1981-1990), some 1.2 billion people - one third of the developing world's population - still did not have access to safe drinking water, although an additional 1.3 billion people did acquire access to safe water during the Decade. In 1990, one out of every two children in developing countries did not complete primary education, while 3 out of 10 adults - and 6 out of 10 women - were illiterate. An estimated 80 million children worked in exploitative situations and 30 million were left to fend for themselves in city streets. Millions more were victims of war and man-made and natural calamities.

10. The great promises made in 1990 should be seen in the context of those and other enormous challenges. It is clear that current rates of progress and the current scale of commitments must be surpassed if the goals for children approved by the Executive Board and subsequently endorsed by the Summit are to be achieved in one decade. The hope for their achievement lies in accelerating progress, galvanizing political commitment and searching for technical breakthroughs and social mobilization to compress the work of several decades into one.

11. Those ambitious goals were the result of extensive consultations in various international forums attended by virtually all Governments and relevant United Nations agencies, including the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank, UNICEF and various NGOs. The fact that the goals were also endorsed by world leaders, following extended year-long deliberations by a working group consisting of their personal representatives and approved by the Executive Board, reflects the considered judgement of the international community that these goals are achievable - and must be achieved.

II. FOLLOW-UP TO THE WORLD SUMMIT FOR CHILDREN

12. The Plan of Action for Implementing the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children points out several key actions that are essential if the goals and strategies for children in the 1990s are to be fully realized. Foremost among these is the principle of a "first call for children" enunciated in paragraph 33 of the Plan of Action (A/45/625, annex). Adherence to this principle, which states that the essential needs of children should be given high priority in the allocation of resources, in bad times and in good, and at the national, international, family and community levels, is the foundation for achieving the goals. Without a steadfast commitment to this principle, too many other competing demands will siphon limited resources away from the needs of children, who by themselves cannot vote on or veto the decisions of their elders regarding the allocation of resources.

13. A "first call for children" must, however, be part of a broader development strategy which, as called for in paragraph 34 of the Plan of Action, would combine the revitalization of economic growth, poverty reduction, human resource development and environmental protection. These, incidentally, are also the pillars of the international development strategy for the fourth United Nations development decade. Both the Human Development Report 1990, published by UNDP, and the World Development Report 1990, published by the World Bank and focusing on poverty, highlight the importance of these four major elements for development strategies in the 1990s. This confluence of thinking among major United Nations agencies on priorities for the 1990s augurs well for the well-being of children.

14. Paragraph 34 of the Plan of Action also calls for a series of specific steps, including the preparation of national programmes of action by all Governments before the end of 1991 to implement the goals and objectives endorsed by the Summit. Paragraph 35 calls for action to be undertaken by all regional and international development agencies - multilateral, bilateral and non-governmental - in support of national and local actions. This call was endorsed by the General Assembly in resolution 45/217 on the World Summit for Children.

15. The Executive Board might wish to add its own endorsement and call for action regarding follow-up to the Summit, not only by UNICEF, but by all those to whom the world leaders have addressed their appeal.

16. In paragraph 35, the Plan of Action requests the United Nations to institute appropriate monitoring mechanisms to report on progress towards achievement of the goals for children in the 1990s. UNICEF, along with other relevant organizations of the United Nations system, is requested to assist in that task and, more specifically, to prepare a consolidated analysis of the plans and actions undertaken by individual countries and the international community. It is expected that UNICEF will have to prepare the first such report in 1992, which will also serve as input to a report on the follow-up to the Summit which the Secretary-General has been asked to submit to the General Assembly, through the Economic and Social Council, in 1992.

17. Specific proposals for UNICEF for follow-up to the Summit Declaration and Plan of Action are included in document E/ICEF/1991/12, which will be discussed by the Programme Committee. A few general issues affecting children, however, stand out from among all those presently facing the world community. It would be most helpful to the secretariat if, in its general debate, the Executive Board would provide comments and guidance on those points.

A. Sustaining and building on the success of universal child immunization

18. The world-wide drive towards the achievement of UCI in the 1980s was one of the biggest collaborative peacetime efforts in history, stretching, as it did, from the Amazon to the Himalayas and from megacities to remote hamlets

unreached by even the postal service. The momentum achieved by this extraordinary success must not be allowed to dissipate. Families and villages never touched by any other health service, or even by any other government-sponsored development programmes, were reached by immunization programmes in recent years. The achievement of UCI is not only a demonstration of what can be done when the world focuses on a practical, achievable target, but it also provides a strategic framework for the great tasks that lie ahead. The techniques and forces used to achieve this breakthrough can and must be enlisted in the effort to satisfy a broader set of human needs. Sustaining and building upon UCI in order to accelerate the empowerment of families through knowledge and access to basic services should be a focus of UNICEF programme cooperation and donor attention in the 1990s.

B. Priority for Africa

19. The outlook for achieving the goals for children in the 1990s in different regions of the world brings the special challenge in Africa into clearer focus. Clearly, Africa will not be in a position to pursue, much less achieve and sustain, many of the ambitious goals for children in the 1990s without major external and internal breakthroughs.

20. Of all the regions in the world, sub-Saharan Africa has the most urgent need for additional outside support in order to restore economic growth and dynamism. On average, per capita income in sub-Saharan Africa has fallen more than 20 per cent since 1980, a decline unprecedented in magnitude and duration in any region of the world this century, and possibly since the start of the industrial revolution. Yet it has occurred in the poorest region of the world, which is also faced with a rapid population growth rate.

21. This decline in production and income has had a devastating effect on basic infrastructures and on salary levels and incentives for teachers, health workers and other government workers. Schools are desperately short of books and health services of drugs and medical supplies. The crisis also has a serious social dimension affecting the very structure and survival of families. As a result, there are increased numbers of female-headed households, more children dropping out of school, particularly girls, and increased youth and adult unemployment. Despite those challenges, some African communities and groups have undertaken successful initiatives to overcome some of the severe constraints by emphasizing cost-effectiveness and community action. Such efforts should be supported and sustained.

22. UNICEF has given sub-Saharan Africa very high priority, increasing its share of total programme expenditures from 21 per cent in the period 1970-1979 to 37 per cent in 1990. Yet in a situation of persistent economic decline, deteriorating health conditions (including AIDS and a resurgence of malaria and other diseases), as well as natural disasters and social and political turmoil, this relatively modest amount of UNICEF support, as well as total levels of external support, has been grossly inadequate to meet the pressing needs of children. Measures such as debt relief, more favourable terms of

trade, adjustment with a human face, slowing population growth, rapid expansion of basic education and political reforms would all be conducive to reversing the decline of development in Africa. In terms of the most concrete actions that UNICEF can take in the first half of the 1990s, several major priorities stand out.

1. Bamako Initiative

23. The Bamako Initiative needs to be implemented urgently. Over the past two years, more than 20 countries have begun implementing this Initiative to revitalize primary health care (PHC) in a programmatically sound and financially sustainable manner, at costs that can be mobilized by African Governments, communities and their external supporters. Many initial misunderstandings about the programme have now been clarified. There is need for greater donor support and financing to accelerate the implementation of the Initiative, however. Support for this merits priority attention from all members of the Executive Board.

2. Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome

24. In the context of rapidly deteriorating health conditions, the AIDS pandemic threatens the many hard won gains of child survival programmes in over a dozen of the most seriously affected countries in Africa. While the world awaits scientific breakthroughs on possible vaccines and cures for this dreaded disease, Africa requires support for massive information and education campaigns, as well as for humane social support systems for AIDS orphans and other affected children, women and families. In the absence of dramatic progress in preventing the spread of AIDS, the goals for reducing maternal and child mortality in the 1990s may prove to be unattainable, or attainable only after discounting the increased mortality due to AIDS. Clearly AIDS is putting a severe strain on already stressed health systems. There is, therefore, an urgent need to improve, maintain and expand health care services in order to cater to the needs of AIDS patients and ensure the achievement of the health goals for the 1990s.

C. Restructuring national budgets and development assistance

25. UNICEF has estimated that an additional $20 billion per year will be needed during the coming decade to achieve the goals for children approved by the Executive Board and endorsed by the World Summit for Children. Roughly two thirds of this $20 billion must be provided by the countries themselves, partly through more efficient use of existing resources, but primarily through restructuring national resource allocations so as to give greater priority to the needs of the most vulnerable sectors. The remaining $6 billion to $7 billion will have to come from external sources, a substantial share of which should be earmarked for sub-Saharan Africa, where the possibilities for reallocating internal resources are very limited. Official development

assistance (ODA) has been increasing at the rate of 2 per cent per year, and while larger increases are highly desirable, they cannot be counted on at this time. The challenge, then, is to promote an effective combination of reallocated internal resources and restructured ODA so that larger proportions of available resources are allocated to basic services that support human development and benefit the poorest mothers and children. Three kinds of restructuring must be promoted:

(a) A higher proportion of available resources should be allocated to social sectors such as health, education, water supply and sanitation and nutrition;

(b) Within those sectors, a larger share of resources should be allocated to basic services: PHC instead of hospital construction; basic education instead of secondary and higher education; water supply and sanitation services to rural and low-income urban areas instead of to well-to-do urban areas; and nutrition programmes targeted to those in greatest need;

(c) A higher proportion of ODA should be allocated to sub-Saharan Africa and to least developed countries in other regions.

26. Only about 3 per cent of bilateral ODA now goes to PHC, primary education and rural water supply and sanitation. Thus, there is ample room for restructuring, but it will require the cooperation of both donor and recipient Governments. Members of the Executive Board from both donor and recipient Governments can play an important advocacy role in this vital area, and ideas and comments from Board members would be most useful.

D. Continuing burden of debt

27. Clearly, the capacity of developing countries to devote increased resources to achieving the decade's goals for children will depend on their reaching and maintaining positive per capita growth over the next 10 years, on the reduction of military expenditures and on a significant lessening of interest payments to external creditors. A breakthrough on the debt problem on the scale required has yet to occur. Debt relief schemes implemented to date have had only a minimal impact on the overall burden of indebtedness of developing countries. Although the problem is no longer on the front pages of the newspapers, it persists, and new solutions must be found. UNICEF will continue to advocate more forceful debt relief measures and to promote "debt relief for children" and social investment schemes such as the ongoing UNICEF/Inter-American Bank initiative. Ideas and comments from the Executive Board on how to accelerate efforts in this field would be most welcome. (For a more comprehensive account of UNICEF "debt relief for children" measures, see E/ICEF/1991/CRP.4.)

III. PROGRAMMES FOR CHILDREN AS THE CONSCIENCE OF A MOVEMENT

28. The challenge provided by the goals and strategies for children in the 1990s and their endorsement by the World Summit for Children is so broad and all encompassing that "business as usual" is unlikely to yield the desired results. What is needed is nothing short of a global movement similar to movements against slavery, colonialism, racism or women's inequality. To succeed, a movement for children will need to ally itself closely with the movements for peace, environmental protection, population and other causes that are likely to dominate the world of the 1990s. The Executive Board may wish to comment on how these mutual adjustments could best be achieved.

29. The Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Declaration and Plan of Action of the World Summit for Children provide a powerful manifesto for such a movement. The UNICEF family, including the Executive Board, National Committees and the secretariat, is uniquely situated to stimulate and support the involvement of a broad range of forces in such a movement.

30. The challenge is to think and act strategically, to provide examples and leadership and to act, not as "owners" of the movement, but as supportive collaborators in a vast alliance for children.

31. In its day-to-day work, UNICEF advocacy must reach beyond the services and actions for children through which it provides modest financial, material and technical cooperation. But UNICEF cannot advocate just by words alone. It must show the way, and do so through the example of its country programme cooperation. The country programme can set a standard of strategic thinking and cost-effective planning. It should show how basic services can be brought to the most disadvantaged and vulnerable sectors of the population through large-scale, sustainable and affordable means. The elements of strategy characteristic of UNICEF cooperation, such as disparity reduction, empowerment of women, area-based approaches, etc., should be so well integrated into the programme that it will be seen as a model for others.

32. While concentrating its limited resources in a few key sectors or in a particularly disadvantaged area of a country, UNICEF must also be cognizant of the wider range of issues affecting that country's children. The broader advocacy dimension of UNICEF work must be developed, with full respect for national policy and attitudes, for what is being done or is planned by UNICEF allies and for the range of opportunities that will arise.

33. These are the challenges facing UNICEF in the next two or three years: to develop and improve country programming so that UNICEF-supported programmes everywhere are models of affordable, sustainable development for children; and to become a full, active and supportive partner in a larger national and global effort to achieve the entire range of child-related development goals in the 1990s.

Notes

1/ A/45/625, annex, Plan of Action, para. 21.

2/ Ibid., para. 7.